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SOUTH AFRICA

SUCCESS STORY

Scholarships Cultivate Economists

Scholarships help South Africans build expertise in economics



Photo: USAID/N. Cohen

Economist Thabo Chauke, Deputy Director of the Department of Trade and Industry, at his office in Pretoria.

A USAID-sponsored scholarship program helped Thabo Chauke achieve his professional dreams.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

When apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994, math and science education was weak and largely unavailable to most South Africans. This contributed to a serious shortage of black economists in and outside of the government. Recognizing this deficit and the important role economists play in policy, USAID launched a program to help train South African economists.

Under the program, 146 black South Africans have received graduate degrees in economics at American and South African universities. The first group of students in the program pursued PhD and Master's Degrees at various universities in the United States. Almost all of these scholars began working for various government departments when they completed their studies. In 2001, USAID began helping three South African universities upgrade their economics curricula to attract and train qualified economists. USAID helped the universities develop courses and provided 76 scholarships for students of labor economics, trade and regulatory policy, and resource/environmental economics.

Thabo Chauke is one of these students. Thabo came from a poor, single parent family in Hammanskraal, a rural northern town. Thabo's aunts and uncles scraped together enough money to get him through a bachelor's degree, but they did not have enough money for further studies. He tried selling vegetables and sweets to raise the necessary funds, but the costs were too high.

Thabo began working at the Department of Trade and Industry, where he held several junior positions. When he heard about the USAID scholarship program from a previous recipient, he was determined to get selected. He applied for the scholarship, was accepted, and enrolled as a Mandela Economics Scholar at the University of Cape Town, where he successfully completed a master's degree in economics in 2005. Today, he is the trade department's deputy director.

Scholars such as Thabo are already having an impact on economic policies in South Africa. They form part of a large and increasingly influential South African community of economists, who, through their dedication, are ensuring that they will continue to play a key role in their country's development.